



ROBERT FROST'S "THE DEATH OF THE HIRED MAN": A MATERIAL FOR DEVELOPING STUDENTS' READING AND WRITING SKILLS

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**Abstract**

This study explores the effectiveness of a literary text as a material for developing students' reading and writing skills in an ESL/EFL classroom. It explains the reason why teachers should introduce a poem in a language class and also shows how they can extract benefits from it. Robert Frost's "The Death of the Hired Man" is the literary text explored in this study to demonstrate how different techniques of language teaching can be applied in a tertiary-level language class to develop the subskills of reading and writing. The techniques include guessing meaning from context, answering brief-answer questions, completing sentences, combining sentences, transforming sentences, changing narrative style, applying punctuation correctly, forming words, utilizing deviations, and writing paragraph, dialogue, and critical appreciation. Findings show that a poem – especially a well-selected one – can effectively be used as a material for developing students' language skills. Sample activities on two of the language skills – reading and writing – are formulated in this study from the aforesaid poem. The activities are set mainly on the basis of the subskills of reading and writing. Further studies on the same poem may focus on developing students' oral communication skills.

**Keywords:** ESL, EFL, poem, language class, reading skill, writing skill

**Introduction**

Literature can be an effective material for language teaching because it can be used as a perfect instrument to stimulate and speed up the teaching and learning process (Brumfit & Carter, 1986; Carter & McRae, 2014; Carter, 2007; Carter & Long, 1990; Phat, 2013). It is an authentic material for expanding students' language awareness (Collie & Slater, 1987; Lazar, 1993). It works as a wonderful source for developing students' linguistic competence. As an authentic material, it offers students a chance to process and interpret a new language, improve their vocabulary, deal with real-life situations, understand another culture, and develop their language skills.

Povey (1967) argues that literature provides not only evidence of extensive and subtle vocabulary usage but also complex and exact syntax which can be utilized in an ESL/EFL class. In fact, the use of literature as a technique for teaching both basic language skills (i.e., reading, writing, listening, and speaking) and language areas (i.e., vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation) has become popular within the field of ESL/EFL learning and teaching (Hişmanoğlu, 2005). The study of literature particularly enhances the development of reading and writing skills. Reading develops sentence construction ability, enhances the knowledge of vocabulary, brings language fluency, and also helps students develop their own ideas. On the other hand, writing develops students' power of critical thinking and enables them to express their thoughts and ideas literally.

A distinct genre of literature, poetry can be considered a commendable way for developing the language skills of the learners of the tertiary level especially because it develops the skills of identifying and interpreting

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assumptions and implications (Tomlinson, 1986). Supporting this idea, Panavelil (2011) asserts, "[S]tudents who study poetry can simultaneously discover interesting ideas for creative writing" (p. 12). It motivates learners, develops their analytical abilities, and makes them aware of the sensitive expressions used by the poet. It is thought-provoking and capable of introducing the learners to various styles of language usage, especially with the deviations.

Considering the emphasis Tomlinson and Panavelil put on using poetry as a language teaching material, the poem "The Death of the Hired Man" (Frost, 1915; Frost, 1949) by Robert Frost (1874–1963) can be taken as a test case to find out whether it can be exploited for developing tertiary level learners' skills of reading and writing. This dramatic narrative poem was first published in 1914 in *North of Boston*, a collection of seventeen poems by the poet. The poem consists of 175 unrhymed lines in iambic pentameter. It is a dramatic poem that can be performed as a one-act play. Such dramatization of the poem may invite the attention of the learners and make the teaching-learning activities interactive and hence interesting. Besides, the everyday struggle of the characters, their conflicts, the idea of man's justice and woman's mercy, the relationship between husband and wife, between servant and master, etc. are such elements as are supposed to be familiar to all the language learners irrespective of their country, religion and culture. Considering different aspects of the poem, especially the ones that meet the demand of a language classroom, the present study aims at exploring the potential of the poem as a material for developing the reading and writing skills of tertiary-level ESL/EFL students.

### Literature Review

Poetry helps students do well on high stake tests because it gives their minds an exhilarating workout (Mittal, 2016; Praveen, 2007; Stanley, 2004). As such, poetry inspires students to read more, imagine more, think more, discuss more, and write more. Most often it is seen that classroom tests and enjoyment are the two opposite things to combine. These opposite things may easily be addressed by using a poem for the purpose of language teaching. In this regard, the poem should be selected properly to ensure that it corresponds to the student's age and interest (Kirkgöz, 2008). Otherwise, it may prove useless. According to Mittal (2016), if teachers use a poem that is high in thought, full of mysticism and metaphysical elements, it will not serve the purpose. A poem that is free from the elements mentioned by Mittal is "The Death of the Hired Man." Written in a rather simple and lucid language, this poem can be a suitable material for the language class.

Poetry can be a powerful element for developing students' oral language abilities. It can lay a strong foundation for reading a new language and its use in writing classes can provide the learners with an effective and collaborative means of learning a language and delivering personal expressions through the language learned (Finch, 2003; Hadaway, Vardell & Young, 2002). As a part of this learning and expressing, as mentioned by Spiro (2004), advanced students can focus on pronunciation, spelling links, word-building skills, idioms, forming statements, questions, or negative forms. Expressing through writing helps students clarify their thoughts and remember what they have learned.

There is no doubt that reading and writing work simultaneously. Omojuwa (1997) found that reading and writing skills are actually closely related and could most often be regarded as one unified skill. Considering Omojuwa's views, this study specifically emphasizes on the development of students' reading and writing skills simultaneously.

A study conducted by Darmawati (2011) among 70 students of class XI shows that the use of poetry as an authentic material for language teaching was effective in improving the writing ability of the participants. For collecting necessary data, the researcher gave the participants the test of writing paragraphs twice: first as the pretest and afterward as the posttest. The study claims that the result of the posttest conducted among the experimental group was much better than that of the pretest.

Khan (2020) has attempted to facilitate the use of classic literary texts in ELT classrooms. She has explored Shakespeare's Sonnet 65 to illustrate some vital themes and crafted some activities out of the poem. In her study, the researcher has worked on activities related to pronunciation, vocabulary, prosody, deviant language, figurative language, poet's intention, and reader's expectations. Items of rhyme scheme, stress, and intonation are discussed in the prosody section. Some other items like alliteration, personification, assonance, consonance, and antithesis are discussed in the figurative language section.

The poem "Our Deepest Fear" by Marianne Williamson is used by Bidari (2021) as a teaching material for inspiring advanced students, aged 15-19, to use creative writing for enhancing their self-expression and also to give

them the experience of mindful reading, listening, and writing. Besides the warm-up activity, she has kept four other activities: communicative activity, poetic activity, question-answer segment, and analysis of the poem. Communicative activity is included for building the background or setting the context. In the poetic activity, the task of filling in the gaps is given. The task of answering questions is given to allow the learners to express themselves. The tasks of bringing out the meaning of the poem and finding out its tone are included in the final activity.

Rahman and Sharif (2018) used one of Robert Frost's poems as a material for developing the reading and writing skills of students. Their work dropped an important grammatical item: the use of punctuation. Sufficient usage of punctuation is seen in dramatic narrative poems. Robert Frost's "The Death of the Hired Man" is no exception to this. Learners can learn various uses of punctuation from this poem.

Many analytical works on Robert Frost's poems are available as they are taught in literature classes worldwide. But works that exploit his poems in language classes are quite inadequate. The same is the case with his poem "The Death of the Hired Man." Analyses of this poem from different perspectives are available but its potentials as a material for developing students' language skills are yet unexplored. The present study is an attempt to work in that direction.

### **Methodology**

This is a qualitative study where the textual analysis method is used. Data are collected from both primary and secondary sources. The text of the poem "The Death of the Hired Man" by Robert Frost serves as the primary source of this study. The secondary sources are different books, journals, and articles that are consulted to explore the tasks to be set for developing tertiary-level students' reading and writing skills.

### **Discussion**

"The Death of the Hired Man" by Robert Frost is a rich source of materials for English language teaching. Different ESL/EFL tasks can be formulated by exploiting this poem. In this section, possible tasks for developing students' reading and writing skills are given.

#### ***Tasks for Developing Reading Skills***

To improve students' reading skills, the following tasks can be formulated for the target students:

**Brainstorming.** Learners can start analyzing the poem with a brainstorming activity (Navaee & Asadi, 2015). According to Ghabanchia and Behrooznia (2014), brainstorming plays a significant role in developing learners' abilities in reading comprehension and critical thinking. The topic "home" can be selected for this purpose. The learners may be asked to think about the possible definition of "home". After a minute or two, the teacher can throw the question, "What is home?" Then he/she can elicit the answers and give necessary feedback. The answers provided by the learners will ensure their involvement with the topic. After that, the teacher may talk about the definitions of home given by the characters of the poem. The definitions are:

- i. "Home is the place where, when you have to go there, / They have to take you in." (Lines 122-123)
- ii. "...it [is] / Something you somehow haven't to deserve." (Lines 124-125)

**Developing Vocabulary.** According to Kolk (2015), a poem's purposeful selection of words encourages the learners to read it closely and carefully. She also asserts, "Word choice can also prompt rich vocabulary discussions since students can debate authors' word choices and explore multiple meanings and nuances." Students can also enrich their knowledge of vocabulary from the poem "The Death of the Hired Man" because there is ample usage of vocabulary in it. Some examples are (i) Musing (Line 1), (ii) Harbor (Line 15), (iii) Grudge (Line 52), (iv) Queer (Line 59), (v) Pique (Line 76), and (vi) Dislodge (Line 94).

**Guessing Meaning from Context.** Sometimes the meaning of some words can be decided by the context in which the words are used. Such a meaning of a particular word is termed as its contextual meaning. Richards and Schmidt (1985) define contextual meaning as "the meaning a linguistic item has in context, for example, the meaning a word has within a particular sentence, or a sentence has in a particular paragraph" (p. 128). The comprehension of the contextual meaning of a word used in a poem requires a student's deep involvement with the poem concerned. The students can be asked to guess the meaning of any word with the help of the context that the poem provides. They can be given multiple choices to identify the meaning. Examples are given below:

- |                       |                    |                           |
|-----------------------|--------------------|---------------------------|
| a. Beholden (Line 21) |                    |                           |
| i. Obligate           | ii. To be hold     | iii. Guilty               |
| b. Coax (Line 28)     |                    |                           |
| i. To Flatter         | ii. To persuade    | iii. To gratify           |
| c. Nod off (Line 44)  |                    |                           |
| i. Awake              | ii. To fall asleep | iii. To shake             |
| d. Jumble (Line 58)   |                    |                           |
| i. To mix             | ii. To unite       | iii. To talk incoherently |
| e. Run on (Line 61)   |                    |                           |
| i. Continue           | ii. To run         | iii. To talk constantly   |

**Completing Sentences.** Sentence fragments used in dialogues sometimes give insights into the mental construct of the characters, their changing thoughts, and their checked emotions. According to British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC, 2023), they are used to create a conversational effect, to put emphasis on a particular point, to create a dramatic effect, and to show surprise. Teachers can identify some incomplete sentences or sentence fragments used in the poem "The Death of the Hired Man" and can give the students the task of completing them according to their textual contexts. This task can introduce the students to all the dimensions the fragments can create. Examples of incomplete sentences used in the poem are given below:

- i. "You remember....." (Line 61)
- ii. "Because he liked it....." (Line 84)
- iii. "We wouldn't mind him....." (Line 147)
- iv. "you will be surprised at him...." (Line 159)
- v. "I'd not be in hurry to say that..." (Line 162)

**Answering Brief-answer Questions.** Teachers can provide some brief questions and ask the students to answer the questions. This can assess their level of comprehending of the poem. Examples of such questions are given below:

- i. What does the title of the poem suggest?
- ii. How does Mary differ from her husband?
- iii. What is Mary's attitude towards Silas?
- iv. Why is Warren dissatisfied with Silas?
- v. Why did Harold Wilson help Silas?

### **Tasks for Developing Writing Skills**

Based on the subskills of writing, different activities can be set to improve learners' writing skills. Some of the writing activities set by exploring the poem "The Death of the Hired Man" are as follows:

**Word Formation.** Poetry is a great source of exploring new words and expressions. Different processes of word formation such as prefixation, suffixation, compounding, etc. are evidently found in poetry. Students can be asked to find the usages of prefixes, suffixes, and compounding for using them in sentences of their own. In the poem, sample words that use prefixes or suffixes are (i) dis-lodge (Line 94), (ii) un-load-ing (Line 95), (iii) be-hold-en (Line 21), and (iv) better-ing (Line 25). Examples of compounding can be found in the words (i) tip-toe (Line 3), (ii) pocket-money (Line 28), (iii) barn-door (Line 35), (iv) self-respect (Line 53), and (v) harp-like (Line 110).

**Use of Mechanics and Punctuation.** A writing subskill that is related to the manipulation of the script of the language is the correct use of mechanics and punctuation. There are evident usages of mechanics and punctuation in the poem "The Death of the Hired Man." This poem is full of commas, full stops, question marks, capitalization, single quotations, double quotations, colons, dashes, and hyphens. Teachers can ask the learners to find out the use of different punctuation marks from the text and ask them to form the rules of mechanics and punctuation from their findings. Sample findings are given below:

#### **Comma**

- i. "I told him so last haying, didn't I?" (Line 13)

- ii. "All right," I say, "I can't afford to pay / Any fixed wages, though I wish I could." (Lines 22-23)
- iii. "Yes, I took care to keep well out of earshot." (Line 73)
- iv. "Well, those days trouble Silas like a dream." (Line 74)

#### ***Colon***

- i. "Sh! Not so loud: he'll hear you," Mary said. / "I want him to: he'll have to soon or late." (Line 31-32)
- ii. "Warren," she said, "he has come home to die: / You needn't be afraid he'll leave you this time." (Line 114-115)
- iii. "But, Warren, please remember how it is: / He's come to help you ditch the meadow." (Line 163-164)

#### ***Hyphen***

- i. Pocket-money (Line 28)
- ii. Barn-door (Line 35)
- iii. Morning-glory (Line 110)
- iv. Sharp-edged (Line 155)
- v. Chair-back (Line 155)

#### ***Dash***

- i. "A miserable sight, and frightening, too— / You needn't smile—I didn't recognise him— / I wasn't looking for him—and he's changed." (Lines 36-38)
- ii. "He jumbled everything. I stopped to look / Two or three times—he made me feel so queer— / To see if he was talking in his sleep. (Lines 58-60)
- iii. He ran on Harold Wilson—you remember— / The boy you had in haying four years since. (Lines 61-62)
- iv. "He thinks young Wilson a likely lad, though daft / On education—you know how they fought" (Lines 68-69)
- v. "Why didn't he go there? His brother's rich, / A somebody—director in the bank." (Lines 133-134)
- vi. "Warren returned—too soon, it seemed to her." (Line 172)

#### ***Capitalization***

As poems use the most deviated form of common language, students can learn some interesting rules of capitalization from this poem. They can learn to capitalize the first letter of every line of the poem and the first word of a quoted sentence. Another striking thing is that the first word from the very first line of the poem is all capitalized to put emphasis on the word.

**Developing Grammar.** Different activities can be formed for developing students' knowledge of grammar – both within a sentence and beyond the sentence. For enhancing students' sentence-level grammar, the activity of transforming sentences is set while for developing their skill in the grammar beyond the sentence, the activity of combining multiple sentences is set. Changing the narrative style is set to address both these types of grammar.

**Transforming Sentences.** Teachers can give the learners the task of changing sentences or transforming sentences as directed in the parentheses that follow the sentences concerned. Examples of such sentences are given below:

- i. "When she heard his step, / She ran on tip-toe down the darkened passage." (Lines 2-3) (Simple)
- ii. "She took the market things from Warren's arms / And set them on the porch." (Lines 8-9) (Complex)
- iii. "Who else will harbor him?" (Line 15) (Assertive)
- iv. "He's finished school, and teaching in his college." (Line 63) (Simple)
- v. "He never told us that." (Line 135) (Interrogative)

**Combining Sentences.** Teachers can use two or more sentences from the poem to be combined by the students. This activity will help the learners combine the idea that the relevant sentences possess and express it with precision. Sample sentences for combination are as follows:

- i. "He's asleep beside the stove. / When I came up from Rowe's I found him here, / Huddled against the barn-door fast asleep." (Lines 33-35)
- ii. "Its light poured softly in her lap. She saw / And spread her apron to it." (Lines 108-109)

- iii. "He wouldn't let me put him on the lounge. / You must go in and see what you can do." (Lines 156-157)
- iv. "He has a plan. You mustn't laugh at him." (Line 165)

**Changing Narrative Style.** As the poem "The Death of the Hired Man" is full of dialogues, teachers can select some speeches from the poem and give the learners the task of changing the narrative style. Excerpts from the poem will enable the learners to locate the speeches easily and to identify both the speaker and the listener or the person spoken to. Examples of some reported speeches along with the reporting clauses, placed at different parts of the expressions, taken from the poem are given below:

- i. "Be kind," she said. (Line 7)
- ii. "When was I ever anything but kind to him?  
But I'll not have the fellow back," he said. (Lines 11-12)
- iii. "All right, I say, I can't afford to pay  
Any fixed wages, though I wish I could." (Lines 22-23)
- iv. "Sh! Not so loud: he'll hear you," Mary said.  
"I want him to: he'll have to soon or late." (Lines 31-32)
- v. "Warren," she said, "he has come home to die:  
You needn't be afraid he'll leave you this time." (Lines 114-115)

**Utilizing Deviations.** When using poetry in the classroom, the deviant use of language found in it can be exploited for expanding student's language awareness and interpretative abilities (Lazar, 1993). The poem "The Death of the Hired Man" is full of syntactic deviations. So, exploitation of this poem can give the learners the scope to find out those deviations and convert them to regular prose. Some of the deviations are as follows:

- i. "What good is he? Who else will harbour him / At his age for the little he can do?" (Lines 15-16)
- ii. "Off he goes always when I need him most." (Line 18)
- iii. "Nothing would do: he just kept nodding off." (Line 44)
- iv. "Silas has better claim on us you think / Than on his brother? Thirteen little miles / As the road winds would bring him to his door." (Lines 129-131)
- v. "Then there were three there, making a dim row, / The moon, the little silver cloud, and she." (Lines 170-171)

### **Some Other Tasks**

Teachers can also exploit the poem to make the students perform some other common activities like writing paragraphs and dialogues selecting topics from the poem or activities like writing a critical appreciation of the poem and explaining its theme.

Teachers can give the task of writing paragraphs freely on any topic related to the poem. A possible title of the paragraph may be "Home." While writing the paragraph, students should use a topic sentence, necessary developers, and a terminator in the paragraph. They should also maintain cohesion and use necessary cohesive devices/discourse markers in it.

As a dramatic narrative, the poem is full of dialogues. Teachers can ask the learners to trace how dialogues are stated in a poem. They can also form different groups, give those groups different topics and ask them to write dialogues following the pattern used in the poem. In this case, the dialogue selected from the poem will serve as a model for the students and their task will be a guided one. However, the students should be asked to use necessary social English expressions towards both the beginning and the end of the dialogue concerned. Then teachers can explain the differences between written and spoken languages by analyzing the writing patterns of the written dialogues.

Teachers can also use this poem to develop students' concepts of academic and non-academic writing. They can assign the students to write on the theme of the poem because gradual and focused academic writing classes offered to graduate students in foreign language contexts will remedy the challenges faced during writing in the second/foreign language (Cennetkuşu, 2017). The learner can also be asked to write a critical appreciation of the poem. These things fall into the category of academic writing. On the other hand, when the learners are asked to write dialogues, it falls into non-academic writing.

## Conclusion

The dramatic narrative style of Robert Frost's "The Death of the Hired Man," its subject matter, and its simple language expressed mainly through colloquial dialogues – all can work together to create interest among the learners and motivate them to learn. Tertiary-level learners may feel connected with the poem because of the universal appeal of its theme that develops through a conflict between a couple. The learners can easily relate their thought to the poem. It may improve their interpretative ability and can remove their monotony in language class.

Activities like guessing meaning from context, completing sentence fragments, and answering brief-answer questions can develop the reading skill of the learners while tasks like exploring the processes of word formation, correct application of punctuations, combining sentences, transforming sentences, changing narrative style, utilizing deviations and writing paragraph, dialogue and critical appreciation can develop their writing skill. For enhancing grammar, items from both within the sentence and beyond the sentence are incorporated in this study. Though most of the tasks can equally be formulated by using both prose and poetry, the task of utilizing deviations is possible to formulate only by exploiting poetry. Besides, tasks like changing the narrative style and tracing the application of punctuation marks are encouraged by the dramatic-narrative style of the poem. However, this study explores the possibility of using "The Death of the Hired Man" as a teaching material to develop students' reading and writing skills. Further studies are required to explore how this poem can be exploited for developing their listening and speaking skills.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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